

# ***From the Wyoming Department of Health***

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## **Why Worry About Secondhand Smoke?**

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When it comes to secondhand smoke, the controversy continues to rage in Wyoming. The old arguments about smokers' and nonsmokers' rights come to the forefront as the pros and cons of community and statewide smoking bans are debated. Let's try to put the secondhand smoke question into perspective: At its heart, it is a personal and public health issue.

In the over 20 years that I practiced clinical medicine in Wheatland I often wondered why some people who developed new lung cancers never gave a history of smoking. I also never understood why other individuals who presented with a heart attack never gave a history of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, or had a positive family history of coronary artery disease. Were some of the children that I treated with new onset asthma exposed to secondhand smoke, and did the secondhand smoke trigger their asthma? Was a tragic SIDS death that I dealt with one morning in the emergency room possibly related to parental smoking?

We know so much more now than even just a few years ago about the health effects of secondhand smoke. In light of the compelling new data that is accumulating on the subject, I believe more firmly than ever that secondhand smoke was a contributing factor in many of my patients' troubles.

Let's look at the health facts regarding secondhand smoke:

- Secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals known to be toxic, including more than 50 that can cause cancer.
- Nonsmokers who are exposed to secondhand smoke at home or work increase their heart disease risk by 25-30 percent and their lung cancer risk by 20-30 percent.
- Breathing secondhand smoke has immediate harmful effects on the cardiovascular system that can increase the risk of heart attack. People who already have heart disease are at especially high risk.
- Secondhand smoke exposure causes respiratory symptoms in children and slows their lung growth.

- Secondhand smoke helps cause sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more frequent and severe asthma attacks in children.
- There is no risk-free level of secondhand smoke exposure. Even brief exposure can be dangerous.

Unfortunately, our general approach to healthcare in this country can be compared to “closing the barn door after the horses have escaped.” Instead of taking care of our health today, we tend to abuse ourselves and then look for solutions to our health problems later. Sometimes it is too late to find an answer. Treatment is also often expensive and many individuals lack the appropriate access to medical care they desperately need.

Prevention and health promotion should take center stage as we wrestle with the health issues -- including secondhand smoke -- that confront us each and every day.

Secondhand smoke is quite simply, unhealthy. Those who are exposed should give careful thought and consideration to the serious and potentially life-threatening conditions that may occur as a result of working and living in such an environment.

I encourage everyone to jump on the bandwagon now, and promote a healthier environment and lifestyle for all in Wyoming. Remember, “Commit to your health.”

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